

**Report on Hydrologically Connected Ground Water and Surface  
Water in the Upper Niobrara-White Natural Resources District**

**Nebraska Department of Natural Resources  
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## Table of Contents

<b>Table of Contents</b> .....	<b>i</b>
<b>Table of Figures</b> .....	<b>ii</b>
<b>Introduction</b> .....	<b>1</b>
Purpose.....	1
Background.....	1
Basic Principles of Ground Water – Surface Water Interactions .....	2
River Basins in the UNWNRD .....	3
<b>Niobrara River Basin</b> .....	<b>3</b>
General Description /Precipitation/Land Cover.....	4
Characterization of Surface Water Flows .....	4
Surface Water Appropriations/Administration .....	5
Hydrogeology of the River Basin .....	6
Ground Water Wells / Development.....	9
Analysis / Conclusions.....	10
<i>Niobrara River Upstream of the Mirage Flats Diversion</i> .....	10
<i>Mirage Flats Area/Niobrara River from Mirage Flats Diversion to</i> <i>Confluence of Box Butte Creek</i> .....	11
<i>Confluence of Box Butte Creek to Cherry County Line</i> .....	13
<b>Box Butte Creek Basin</b> .....	<b>14</b>
General Description .....	14
Surface Water Appropriations/Administration/Characterization of Surface Flows .....	14
Hydrogeology 14	
Ground Water Wells / Development.....	15
Analysis / Conclusions.....	15
<b>Snake Creek Basin</b> .....	<b>15</b>
General Description .....	15
Surface Water Appropriations/Administration/Characterization of Surface Flows .....	16
Hydrogeology .....	16
Ground Water Wells / Development.....	17
Analysis / Conclusions.....	17
<b>White River and Hat Creek Basins</b> .....	<b>17</b>
General Description .....	17
Surface Water Appropriations/Administration/Characterization of Surface Flows .....	17
Hydrogeology .....	18
Ground Water Wells / Development.....	20
Analysis / Conclusions.....	20
<b>Potential Out of Basin Effects of Water Use in UNWNRD</b> .....	<b>21</b>
<b>Bibliography</b>	
<b>Appendix I</b>	
<b>Appendix II</b>	
<b>Separate Map</b>	

# **Table of Figures**

## **Report on Hydrologically Connected Ground Water and Surface Water in the UNWNRD**

### **Appendix I**

Figure 1	January 10, 2003 Study Request Letter
Figure 2	February 26, 2003 Response Letter
Table 1	Surface Water Rights in the UNWNRD

### **Appendix II**

Figure 1	Surface Water Basins, Streams and Diversion Points - UNWNRD
Figure 2	Annual Precipitation at Alliance, Chadron and Harrison by Year
Figure 3	National Land Cover Dataset Northwest Nebraska (Map)
Figure 4	Cropland Acres, Irrigated Acres & Corn & Wheat Production - UNWNRD
Figure 5	Stream Network, Canals, and Irrigation Wells UNWNRD
Figure 6	Niobrara River Average Gaged Annual Flows UNWNRD
Figure 7	Average Flows of Niobrara River – 4 Gages Plus Mirage Flats Diversion
Figure 8	Average Flows of Niobrara – 3 Gages Plus Mirage Flats Diversion
Figure 9	Annual Flow of Niobrara River at State Line
Figure 10	Annual Flow of Niobrara River above Box Butte Reservoir
Figure 11	Annual Flow of Niobrara River below Box Butte Reservoir
Figure 12	Annual Flow of Niobrara River at Gordon
Figure 13	Annual Flows of Niobrara at State Line and Above Box Butte Reservoir
Figure 14	Annual Flows of Niobrara Above and Below Box Butte Reservoir
Figure 15	Annual Diversions to Mirage Flats Canal
Figure 16	Annual Diversions to All Niobrara River Canals in UNWNRD
Figure 17	Annual Diversions of Canals Between State Line and Box Butte Reservoir
Figure 18	Geologic Map UNWNRD
Figure 19	Groundwater Regions
Figure 20	Cross Section E-E'
Figure 21	Cross Section A-A'
Figure 22	Cross Section B-B'
Figure 23	Cross Section C-C'
Figure 24	Cross Section A-A'
Figure 25	Cross Section B-B'
Figure 26	Cross Section C-C'
Figure 27	Cross Section D-D'
Figure 28	Saturated Thickness of the Principal Aquifer - UNWNRD
Figure 29	Water Table on Geologic Map
Figure 30	Water Table on Digital Elevation Model

- Figure 31 Water Table Contours – Eastern Portion of UNWNRD (with Groundwater Regions, Wells, and Surface Water Diversions)
- Figure 32 Water Level Changes in UNWNRD Predevelopment to Spring 2000
- Figure 33 Water Level Changes - Eastern UNWNRD – Predevelopment to Spring 2000
- Figure 34 Cumulative Surface Water Appropriations in Niobrara Basin - UNWNRD by Use - Cumulative
- Figure 35 Surface Water Appropriation Acres in Niobrara Basin - UNWNRD by Use
- Figure 36 Irrigation Wells Completed by Year UNWNRD
- Figure 37 Irrigation Wells – Completed by Year, Cumulative UNWNRD
- Figure 38 Depletive Wells by Completion Date UNWNRD
- Figure 39 Depletive Wells by Completion Date, Cumulative UNWNRD
- Figure 40 Alliance Recorder Well, Box Butte County, NE
- Figure 41 Mirage Flats Recorder Well, Sheridan County, NE
- Figure 42 Water Level Wells in Mirage Flats Area
- Figure 43 Average Depth to Water of Southern Mirage Flats Water Level Wells
- Figure 44 Average Depth to Water of Northern Mirage Flats Water Level Wells
- Figure 45 Trend Analysis of Annual Reach Gain, Precipitation and Well Numbers – Niobrara River State Line Gage to Above Box Butte Reservoir
- Figure 46 Irrigation Wells and Canals – Mirage Flats Area
- Figure 47 Active Irrigation Wells Within Two Miles of the Niobrara River – Mirage Flats Diversion to Box Butte Creek Confluence
- Figure 48 Surface Water Appropriations in the White-Hat Basin of UNWNRD by Use - Cumulative
- Figure 49 Surface Water Appropriation Acres in White-Hat Basin of UNWNRD by Use
- Figure 50 Annual Flow of White River at Crawford

# Report on Hydrologically Connected Ground Water and Surface Water in the Upper Niobrara-White Natural Resources District

## **Purpose**

This report reviews the background information that was used to assist the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) in making its determination of which basins, subbasins or reaches in the Upper Niobrara-White Natural Resources District (UNWNRD) are fully appropriated in accordance with Neb. Rev. Stat. Chapter 46, Article 7. The report describes: 1) the availability of stream flow to meet current surface water rights in the UNWNRD; 2) the hydrologic connection between ground water and these surface water supplies; and 3) how uses of one source of water may affect availability of the other source.

## **Background**

On January 10, 2003, the UNWNRD sent a letter (Figure 1, Appendix I) requesting that the DNR consult with the UNWNRD. The requested consultation concerned studies and a hearing on the preparation of a joint action plan for the integrated management of hydrologically connected ground water and surface water under the Nebraska Ground Water Management and Protection Act.

The DNR responded on February 26, 2003 (Figure 2, Appendix I) with a preliminary decision according to then current law (Neb. Rev. Stat. 46-656.28(2)1998). In that decision the DNR found reason to believe that the use of hydrologically connected ground water and surface water resources in the UNWNRD was contributing to, or was in the reasonably foreseeable future likely to contribute to, conflicts between ground water users and surface water appropriators. The decision was made based on information found in the UNWNRD's ground water management plan, various United States Geological Survey (USGS) reports, various DNR records, and other reports and records. Based upon the preliminary determination, the DNR initiated a more detailed study to determine the cause of such conflicts, disputes, or difficulties and the extent of the area affected.

On July 16, 2004 LB 962 became effective, replacing portions of the Ground water Management and Protection Act pertaining to the integrated management planning process. The new law provided a transition process for natural resources districts that were in the process of determining whether they needed to develop an integrated management plan (Neb. Rev. Stat. 46-720). Under the new law an integrated management plan must be developed if the DNR determines that a basin, subbasin, or reach within the district is fully appropriated (Neb. Rev. Stat. 46-715). This new legislation provides the following standard to determine whether a basin is "fully appropriated":

*“A river basin, subbasin, or reach shall be deemed fully appropriated if the department determines that then-current uses of hydrologically connected surface water and ground water in the river basin, subbasin, or reach cause or will in the reasonably foreseeable future cause (a) the surface water supply to be insufficient to sustain over the long term the beneficial or useful purposes for which existing natural flow or storage appropriations were granted and the beneficial or useful purposes for which, at the time of approval, any existing instream appropriation was granted, (b) the streamflow to be insufficient to sustain over the long term the beneficial uses from wells constructed in aquifers dependent on recharge from the river or stream involved, or (c) reduction in the flow of a river or stream sufficient to cause noncompliance by Nebraska with an interstate compact or decree, other formal state contract or agreement, or applicable state or federal laws.” (Neb. Rev. Stat. 46-713(3))*

Under the provisions DNR must hold a hearing by November 14, 2004 (Neb. Rev. Stat. 46-714 (4)) and make a final determination designating which river basins/reaches in the UNWNRD are fully appropriated within thirty days of the hearing (Neb. Rev. Stat. 46-714 (5)).

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### **Basic Principles of Ground Water - Surface Water Interactions**

- 1) Where there is a hydrological connection between surface water flow and ground water aquifers, a consumptive use of one depletes the supply in the other.
- 2) In such areas a decrease in recharge to the aquifer from surface water supplies, precipitation, canal seepage or seepage from irrigated fields, will decrease the amount of water infiltrating from the land surface to recharge the ground water aquifer. A decrease in recharge will also decrease the ground water supplies available for use.
- 3) Stream flows are supplied by surface water runoff and by water seeping from the ground water aquifer to the stream as baseflow. Surface water runoff tends to be sporadic, depending on precipitation events. Baseflow from ground water is more constant.
- 4) Changes in baseflow to a stream result from any factor that either changes the water pressure or the water table elevation in any aquifer hydrologically connected to the stream. Consumptive

use of the aquifer by wells or vegetation affects both the aquifer pressure and water table elevation.

5) If a ground water aquifer is closely connected to a surface water stream, decreases in aquifer water pressure or elevation caused by a pumping well will either decrease the movement of water to the stream or induce the movement of water from the stream to the aquifer. In either case, the first noticeable impact of increased consumptive use from an aquifer hydrologically connected to a stream is often a change in the quantity of stream flow rather than a change in the water table elevation of the aquifer. In many cases, changes in water table elevations are detected only when stream flows decline to the point they are no longer able to recharge the aquifer. Thus, in addition to declines in water table elevation, any steady decline in stream flow that cannot be explained by a change in precipitation or other factors is a good indication that the current level of consumptive use of the hydrologically connected surface water and ground water cannot be sustained in the long term.

#### 6) Aquifer Properties:

- (a) *Hydraulic Conductivity (K)* – the volume of water that will flow through a unit cross-sectional area of aquifer in unit time, under a unit hydraulic gradient and at a specified temperature. Basically, K is a measure of how easily water flows through the aquifer. For instance, water flows more easily through a sand and gravel aquifer than an aquifer composed of silts and clays;
- (b) *Transmissivity (T)* is the hydraulic conductivity multiplied by the full thickness of saturated aquifer. The more the saturated thickness; the higher the value of T. Saturated thickness is the thickness of the aquifer where all available pore space is filled with water.

### **River Basins in the UNWNRD**

This report focuses on five river basins and sub-basins within the UNWNRD: the Niobrara River Basin, Box Butte Creek Basin, Snake River Basin, White River Basin, and Hat Creek Basin. The following sections of this report present a general description of the following topics for those basins: 1) *general description/precipitation/land cover*, 2) *characterization of surface water flows*, 3) *surface water appropriations/administration*, 4) *hydrogeology*, 5) *ground water wells/development*, and 6) *analysis/conclusions*. In addition to examining each basin, there will be a brief discussion of where ground water use in the river basin might affect surface water availability outside of the river basin. One separate map deals with all of the basins and is included as a separate insert at the back of the report. That map, developed by the UNWNRD, shows streams that currently have no stream flow according to local residents of the UNWNRD and hydrographers from the DNR. All of the remaining figures for the report are found in Appendix II.

# Niobrara River Basin

## General Description / Precipitation / Landcover

The Niobrara is the largest river basin in the UNWNRD. *For purposes of this report, Snake Creek and Box Butte Creek, which are part of the basin, are primarily treated in separate sections.* Including Snake Creek and Box Butte Creek, the Niobrara River basin within UNWNRD occupies 2,730,000 acres of land, and runs the full length of the NRD from west to east. Figure 1, Appendix II depicts surface water diversions and surface water basin boundaries in the UNWNRD.

Figure 2, Appendix II presents annual precipitation by year for several UNWNRD weather stations. Overall precipitation for the stations exhibited no statistically significant trends in the fifty to seventy five year periods of record. For the longer period of 1896 to 2003, annual precipitation at the Alliance station in the Niobrara basin has minimum, maximum, and average annual values of 8.67, 25.57 and 16.18 inches respectively.

Land cover in this report has been aggregated for the overall district, rather than by sub-basin. Land cover in the UNWNRD consists primarily of rangeland with dryland crops, forest, and irrigated crops comprising most of the balance (Figure 3). There are also small areas of badlands, lakes, wetlands and urban development. In 1997, irrigated harvested cropland accounted for about 39% of total harvested cropland and 5.4 % of the total land area in the four counties that have land area in the UNWNRD. The primary crops grown in the area are corn, wheat, beans, alfalfa, and sugar beets. In general there are relatively few crops grown in the southeastern and southwestern portions of the district. Box Butte County and areas to the north and east of Box Butte County have more cropped area.

Figure 4 presents U.S. Census of Agriculture information regarding changes in cropland acres, and bushels of production in the four-county UNWNRD area between 1969 and 1997. Harvested irrigated cropland acres increased about 150% while total cropland harvested increased by only about 5% during the period. However, of the two major crops; bushels of corn for grain increased tenfold, while wheat production increased by 181%. These changes are far more significant than those experienced by the state overall, which had a 143% increase in corn production and a nearly 13% decrease in wheat production during the same period.

## Characterization of Surface Water Flows

The Niobrara is a perennial stream throughout the study area. Figure 5 depicts the stream and canal network and irrigation wells within the UNWNRD. Figure 6 provides average annual flows on the Niobrara at each gage. The average annual flow leaving the UNWNRD is over 31 times greater the flow entering the UNWNRD at the state line. At the Wyoming State line the Niobrara's flow averaged 2,615 acre-feet per year in the 1956-2002 time period. Above Box Butte Reservoir it averaged 20,334 acre-feet per year (1947-2002) and below the reservoir (after evaporation) it averaged 17,018 acre-feet per year (1947-2002). Approximately seven miles downstream of Box Butte Reservoir the Mirage Flats Canal, the Potmesil Canal, and the Lichte Canal diverted an annual combined average of 16,758 acre-feet from the river in the 1956 to

2002 time period. (Note: these figures are somewhat deceptive because they are long-term averages and flows and diversions by these canals have been decreasing through time). In eastern Sheridan County, south of Gordon, the Niobrara's flow averaged 82,489 acre-feet per year between 1946 and 1994.

Annual average streamflows at the four gaged Niobrara River sites have declined significantly since initiation of measurements between 1946 and 1956 (Figures 7 through 14). One interesting side note is that, for the state line gage only, the maximum decline in streamflow at the state line gage seems to have occurred in the mid- 1970s with levels actually rising since that time.

### **Surface Water Appropriations/Administration**

The Niobrara River in the UNWNRD can be subdivided into two reaches, the reach above the Mirage Flats Canal headgate and the reach below the headgate. There has been an order granting a moratorium on the issuance of new surface water appropriations from the Nebraska-Wyoming state line to the headgate of the Mirage Flats Canal (seven miles below Box Butte Reservoir) in the SENW of Section 26, Township 29 North, Range 48 West of the 6<sup>th</sup> P.M. in Dawes County since November 30, 1990.

Sixty three of the 144 surface water rights in the Niobrara Basin in the UNWNRD are for the portion of the basin upstream of the Mirage Flats canal diversion. The oldest surface water right in the Niobrara Basin dates to 1883 and there are a total of 81 surface water rights downstream of the Mirage Flats Diversion, including those in the Box Butte and Snake Creek Basins.

Some rights are administered in almost all years to supply water for the Mirage Flats diversion's 1937 water right. The Department of Water Resources order (*November 30, 1990*) granting a moratorium in the Niobrara Basin above the Mirage Flats headgate noted: "*Department records show that Box Butte Reservoir has completely filled only once in the last 25 years. For the benefit of Box Butte Reservoir and Mirage Flats Canal, water administration of upstream junior appropriators occurs every year. The hydrologic experience since Box Butte Reservoir was completed in 1945 gives no indication that greater flows can be expected. Public interest is not well served by granting 'paper water rights'.*" Downstream of Box Butte Reservoir, administration has not been required on the mainstem of the Niobrara.

Diversions to the Mirage Flats Canal averaged 17,497 acre-feet per year during the 1948 to 1975 time period and 14,172 acre-feet per year during the 1976 to 2003 time period; a 19% decrease (Figure 15). Diversions to other canals in the basin have also decreased (Figures 16 and 17).

There are eight surface water rights along the Niobrara itself between the Mirage Flats canal diversion and the confluence of Box Butte Creek. One of these is for a storage right immediately downstream of the Mirage Flats diversion. The other seven rights are natural flow irrigation rights with four of them being held by one party. The irrigation rights total 13.58 cfs and 950.8 acres with priority dates from 1953 to 2003. There has been no water administration in this reach. Neither have there been calls for administration to the east of Box Butte Creek.

## **Hydrogeology of the River Basin**

*(Note: This section also contains general regional geologic/hydrologic information relevant to the Box Butte Creek and Snake Creek Basins)*

The principal aquifer units include the Arikaree group and the Ogallala group. In some areas the Sandhills overlie the Ogallala group. Figure 18 provides a geologic map of the district. Figure 19 provides a ground water regions map. The source of water in the study area is primarily local precipitation and underflow of ground water from the west.

The Arikaree Group, which is at the surface in the western and northern portion of the basin, consists mostly of very fine to medium grained sand, sandstone and silt. It also underlies the Ogallala to the east. The Arikaree is a major aquifer in the UNWNRD supplying water to large capacity irrigation wells as well as other depletive water wells in the UNWNRD. Wenzel et. al. (1946) stated that “On the table lands of Sioux and Box Butte counties the sandstones of the Arikaree group yield moderately large amounts of water to wells that penetrate a great thickness”. Bradley (1956) indicated that the Arikaree is only moderately permeable. Many irrigation wells have been drilled into the Arikaree since that time.

The Ogallala Group is at the surface and thickens toward the eastern part of the study area. The Ogallala Group includes the Box Butte, Sheep Creek and Runningwater Units. The thickness of the aquifer reaches over 800 feet in the eastern part of Sheridan County. The Ogallala Group consists of gravelly sand, sand, siltstones, and clay. Quaternary sands overlie the formation and absorb precipitation and transmit it downward to the underlying Ogallala deposits. This Group is also a major aquifer in the UNWNRD supplying water to large capacity irrigation and other types of water wells. The Ogallala will yield water to wells more readily than an equivalent thickness of Arikaree or Brule. Depth to water varies greatly in the Sandhills because of the dunes. In many areas it reaches or approaches the surface as lakes, wetlands or subirrigated areas. However, in other areas it may be 300 feet or more to water from the top of a dune.

Geologic cross-section E-E', figure 20, shows the predominant aquifer trends from the Arikaree Group to the Ogallala Group, west to east across the southern portion of the UNWNRD. This cross-section also shows that these two groups are in contact, meaning ground water can move between the two geologic groups. Cross-Sections A-A', B-B' and C-C', figures 21 to 23, depict the geology from south to north at 3 separate locations moving from west to east across the UNWNRD. A-A' shows the Arikaree to be the aquifer in contact with the Niobrara River in the west of the UNWNRD. B-B' is in the zone where the Arikaree and Ogallala aquifers are both present and the Ogallala is in contact with the Niobrara River. C-C' is located in the easternmost part of the UNWNRD and shows the Ogallala with the Quaternary Sandhills deposits overlying it, in contact with the Niobrara River. These two major aquifers, the Arikaree and Ogallala, which supply ground water to numerous irrigation wells in the UNWNRD are also the aquifers in hydrologic contact with the Niobrara River and supply the Niobrara and other perennial streams in the basin with baseflow.

The Brown Siltstone unit, also referred to as the “Beaver Wall” siltstone beds, is in hydrologic contact with the Niobrara River alluvium along an area from the western to central Box Butte County (Souders, 1981). Although the permeability of this Brown Siltstone unit is low; the unit does contain water and is a source of water supply for stock and domestic wells in the northern

part of the county (Souders et. al. (1980). According to Souders “Irrigation wells could probably be developed in the unit if a considerable thickness, about 300 ft. (91 m), is penetrated and the wells are developed over a long period of time by surging, back-flushing, and over-pumping. On the whole, the unit is not attractive as a source of water supply if a well yield greater than a few hundred gallons per minute is required”. Souders, et. al., also indicated that water moves through this Brown Siltstone unit at the edge of the tableland to the Niobrara Valley. Underflow may be on the magnitude of 1,500 acre-feet ( $1.85 \times 10^6$  m<sup>3</sup>) per year. From west to east across northern Box Butte County the major hydrologic unit in contact with the Niobrara River Valley alluvium transitions from the Brown Siltstone to more permeable formations or units of the Ogallala Group that have a higher hydraulic conductivity (Cross-sections A-A’ through D-D’, Figures 24-27).

Saturated thickness in the study area ranges from the previously mentioned 800 feet in part of Sheridan County to an area where the principal aquifer, as defined by the Conservation and Survey Division (CSD), which does not include the Brown Siltstone Unit, is absent or very thin along the Niobrara in the western portion of the Dawes-Box Butte County line. Aquifer thicknesses in some of the heavily developed areas of Box Butte County are in the 200 to 400 foot range. Saturated thickness is presented in Figure 28. Transmissivity in the study area also varies greatly with the highest transmissivities occurring in southern Sheridan, southern Box Butte, and far west central Sioux counties.

A 1956 U.S. Geological Survey report (Bradley) on the Upper Niobrara Basin indicated that ground water moves in an easterly direction and toward the perennial streams, probably at a rate of less than 1 foot per day (pg. 1). The generalized direction of flow is more varied at the detailed level within the study area. A ground water mound in southeast Sheridan County shows ground water flow moving in all directions away from the top of the ground water mound, north toward the Niobrara River, south to the North Platte Basin, east through the Loup Basin and even west prior to eventually turning north (Figures 29, 30, and 31).

According to water table contour maps and other publications ground water discharge in the Niobrara River Basin occurs through the Niobrara River and its tributaries, lakes, subirrigated areas (ET), and ground water pumping/irrigation (Souders, 1981; Souders et al, 1980). In Box Butte County Souders et. al. estimated that total ground water underflow exiting Box Butte County was 21,000 acre-feet per year, with another 1,500 acre-feet being discharged to springs, seeps, the Niobrara River, Box Butte Creek, and Snake Creek. Of the 21,000 acre-feet of ground water underflow leaving Box Butte County, the majority of that water, about 13,000 acre-feet per year, went north and east to Dawes County, toward the Niobrara River. Also approximately 4,000 acre-feet of ground water was estimated to move northeast into Sheridan County, toward the Niobrara River and Box Butte Creek.

Understanding the total water balance of a basin helps determine the major stresses on the system and how those stressors interact. This in turn helps in understanding how changes to these stressors ultimately impact the total available ground water supply and the resultant baseflow to streams. Significant factors in determining the water balance of the region are precipitation, evaporation, transpiration and recharge. Average annual precipitation in the Upper Niobrara White NRD ranges from 14.9 inches in southern Sioux County to 18.38 inches in

eastern Sheridan County. Most precipitation is received during May, June and July and precipitation is highly variable from year to year. Alliance receives over 79% percent of its annual rainfall from April to September. Thus a great deal of the precipitation arrives at times when it is more subject to evapotranspiration.

Evapotranspiration in areas of shallow water table can significantly influence the water balance of a region. Souders, et. al. (1980), indicated large areas of shallow water table in Box Butte County as of 1938.

Estimates of recharge vary and are dependent upon many factors including “the time of year precipitation occurs, the duration and intensity of rainstorms, the freezing and thawing of the soil column, the wetting and drying of the soil column, the slope of the land, the vegetative cover, cultural practices on the land, biological activities of plants and animals in the soil, the texture and permeability of the soil columns, and the vertical hydraulic conductivity of subsoil strata in the unsaturated zone as well as the hydrologic unit occurring at the surface” (Souders et. al., 1980).

Pettijohn and Chen (1984) provided mapped average annual recharge estimates for Box Butte County that ranged from less than .05 inches to 2.5 to 3.0 inches. The Revised Ground Water Management Plan for the Upper Niobrara-White Natural Resources District (Jacobson Helgoth Consultants 1994) indicated that additional information was needed to prepare more meaningful recharge estimates for the entire UNWNRD so that a better water budget model could be created for the district.

Additionally, increases in crop production would suggest that crop evapotranspiration in the district has probably increased. Significant unknown factors in the water balance of the basin include changes in crop water use efficiency (especially for dryland crops), changes in evapotranspiration salvage, and changes in total crop production on ground water irrigated acres versus all other acres.

### **Ground Water Wells/Development**

The Niobrara Basin has about 2,057 active irrigation wells and 49 high capacity wells (500 gallons per minute or more) used for non-irrigation purposes. Irrigation wells in the UNWNRD portion of the Niobrara Basin increased from 1,161 at the beginning of 1980 to 1,536 at the beginning of 1990 to 2,057 by February 29, 2004. There are approximately 115 irrigation wells within a seven mile buffer of the Niobrara River above the Mirage Flats diversion and approximately 125 irrigation wells in the Niobrara River surface water basin above the Mirage Flats Diversion. Figure 32 provides a map of irrigation well locations as well as information on water level changes since predevelopment. Figure 33 supplies the information at a larger scale for the eastern part of the district. Excluding the Box Butte Creek and Snake Creek Basins there are approximately 990 active irrigation wells downstream of the Mirage Flats diversion in the Niobrara River Basin. As of March 20, 2003 the UNWNRD placed a moratorium on the construction of new wells with a capacity of more than 50 gpm.

Figures 34 through 39 provide cumulative depletive and irrigation well numbers through time as well as cumulative surface water appropriation acres through time for the UNWNRD. Of the 49

high capacity non-irrigation wells in the Niobrara River Basin, 22 were for public water suppliers, 13 were for livestock and 9 were for commercial/ industrial purposes. It should be noted that while surface water irrigated acres in the Niobrara River Basin portion of the UNWNRD have been at a near plateau since 1960, the number of ground water irrigation wells in the same region have grown from 302 to 2013 and the associated ground water acres have grown from 53,000 to 317,000 since 1960.

Figure 32 indicates that substantial ground water level declines have occurred in Box Butte County since 1946, in places reaching more than 50 feet. Figure 40 shows readings from an Alliance recorder well within the area of declines that indicate the depth to water had increased by approximately 40 feet between June 1968 and June 2002. Based on the 2003 CSD decline map the edges of the area of decline have reached within 1 mile of the Niobrara River.

Figure 41 provides evidence of water level changes from a recorder well in the Mirage Flats area. The recorder well shows an initial rise in ground water levels following initiation of observation in the early 1950s through the early to mid 1970s, followed by falling levels since that time. Other recorder wells in the area with measurements beginning in the 1970s also show declines. Figure 32 indicates portions of the area have now experienced substantial water level declines from predevelopment. Figures 42, 43 and 44 indicate averages from some observation wells in the southern and northern portions of the Mirage Flats Area. They indicate a steeper decline in the northern portion of the district, with more modest declines to the south, nearer the river.

### ***Niobrara River Upstream of the Mirage Flats Diversion***

#### *Analysis*

In recent history the Niobrara River has been administered every year to meet the 1937 water right for the Mirage Flats Canal.

The amount of surface water available for diversion from the Niobrara River upstream of the Mirage Flats canal diversion has significantly decreased. At the state line the five-year average flow decreased by 567 acre-feet between the 1956-1960 time period and the 1996-2000 time period. The average flow for the same time periods above Box Butte Reservoir decreased by 4,332 acre-feet. This indicates that although there are significant decreases in average flow at the state line, there are considerably larger decreases after the river enters the state. Records also show that diversions to the Mirage Flats Canal averaged 19% less per year during the 1976 to 2003 time period than during the 1948 to 1975 time period.

River reach gains during the 1956 to 2002 time period were also analyzed for the reach of the Niobrara between the Wyoming-Nebraska State line gage and the gage above Box Butte Reservoir (Figure 45)<sup>1</sup>. Reach gains declined significantly even though during the same period the precipitation at the nearest station, Agate, showed no significant decreasing trend. During this

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<sup>1</sup> The analysis involved examining flow at both gages, subtracting gaged diversions (gaged diversions have rights to approximately 84% of the acres irrigated with surface water rights in the reach), and holding remaining water rights constant through time for purposes of analysis.

same period there was a significant increase in the number of wells in the reach. Regression analysis determined that precipitation has a significant positive contribution toward explaining the variance of the gain while the number of irrigation wells has a negative contribution. Almost 79% of the variations in the gains can be explained by these two factors, with numbers of irrigation wells and local precipitation accounting for 62% and 17% of the variation respectively.

Wells in aquifers that are in hydrologic connection with the Niobrara River have increased significantly over time as have their associated irrigated acres. Within a seven mile buffer of the river reach, the number of active irrigation wells has increased from 24 in 1960 to 115 at present. Significant ground water level declines are currently occurring in the aquifer to the south of the Niobrara River in Box Butte County and the edges of the decline area are approaching the river. Based upon the CSD 2003 decline map, it appears that a portion of that decline is affecting the ground water that flows toward the reach of the Niobrara.

The hydrogeology of the Niobrara Basin in the UNWNRD indicates that these declines are in aquifers that are in hydrologic connection to the Niobrara River. Even in western Box Butte County where the low permeable Brown Siltstone Unit lies between the alluvial aquifer of the Niobrara River and the Arikaree and Ogallala aquifers to the south, the presence of sufficient water to supply domestic wells indicates that there is a hydrologic connection between all these formations and the Niobrara River.

### Conclusions

In summary, for the reach of the Niobrara upstream of the Mirage Flats diversion: there has been a moratorium on new surface water appropriations since 1990, flows have diminished, surface water diversion amounts have diminished, average precipitation amounts have not significantly changed, and the number of irrigation wells hydrologically connected to the stream reach have increased. Water table declines are evident in Box Butte County in aquifers that are in hydrologic connection with the surface waters of the river reach.

The level of surface water supplies is insufficient to sustain the beneficial purposes for which surface water rights on the reach were granted. Based upon hydrogeologic information the aquifers along the Niobrara River above the Mirage Flats Diversion are hydrologically connected to the river reach. Ground water use is depleting the ground water supply in the aquifers. Where wells are depleting aquifers in hydrological connection to a river, the wells will cause depletions to streamflow in the river. Impacts of the wells closest to the river would be expected to cause relatively more significant and quicker impacts to flows. Where present the low permeability of the Brown Siltstone decreases the impacts of declining ground water levels to the south on the Niobrara River; however, without further information, the potential for these impacts on streamflow in the Niobrara River cannot be discounted. Further study of the impact of the Brown Siltstone unit on the potential of wells in aquifers to the south to impact the river should be a component of any integrated surface water/ ground water plan for the basin.

***Mirage Flats Area / Niobrara River from Mirage Flats Diversion to Confluence of Box Butte Creek***

*Analysis*

There appears to be a sizeable reach gain above the Mirage Flats Diversion Dam. In the 1995 to 2003 time period the annual flow of the Niobrara River below Box Butte Reservoir was 13,500 acre-feet and 13,800 acre-feet was removed seven miles further downstream at the Mirage Flats diversion. Since more is being diverted downstream than is being released at the reservoir, the river must be gaining baseflow through this reach in the summer. Additionally, measurements taken by the DNR during the non-irrigation season indicate a monthly reach gain of around 720 acre-feet between the reservoir and the Mirage Flats diversion. It is reasonable to expect some of this reach gain is present during the irrigation season, but the exact amount is unknown.

In an effort to determine more about the current status of this reach of the river DNR staff made spot measurements of streamflow on September 16, 2004 and interviewed several appropriators along the reach. Flow levels found were as follows:

Location	Name	CFS
Nio. Riv. Below Box Butte Reservoir		0.79 cfs
Sec 26-29-48	Nio. Riv below Mirage Flats Div Dam	9.33 cfs
Sec 19-29-45	Nio. Riv. Above Box Butte Cr	12.20 cfs
Sec 29-29-45	Box Butte Cr where it discharges into Nio. Riv	.30 cfs
Sec 20-29-45	Nio. Riv. Below Box Butte Cr	13.80 cfs

All the tributaries located between the Mirage Flats Diversion Dam and Box Butte Creek were dry.

Although there are no long-term flow data, the presence of a reach gain above the diversion dam and between the Box Butte Reservoir and the gage at Gordon, Nebraska, along with the September 2004 DNR measurements suggest that this section of the river is a gaining reach.

There are eight irrigation rights for a total of 13.58 cfs along the reach, most in the lower end of the reach. Comments from interviews with irrigators in this area indicated that currently appropriations in this reach were being satisfied but that flows had decreased in recent years and that some subirrigated wet meadows were no longer wet. One appropriator also indicated that during the summer the river would flow at about half the level it was flowing at the time he was interviewed. There is no record of any administration for the surface water rights in this reach.

This reach of the river is near the irrigated lands of the Mirage Flats Irrigation District and in its downstream end is subject to the impacts of the irrigation district on surface water return flows and baseflow to the river. Figure 15 shows long-term declines in surface water diversions to the Mirage Flats Canal. The data show an overall long term downward trend. Since irrigation wells in the Mirage Flats area are dependent upon recharge from that project, the total supply available to wells is also affected. Because of surface water recharge from the project, water table levels in the area rose until the early to mid-1970s and then began to fall. A USGS report indicated that in 1962, prior to the time when the ground water levels began falling, about 3,000 acre-feet of ground water was pumped in the Mirage Flats project area, which was probably less than the average annual amount of seepage from the project to the zone of saturation (Keech, 1964).

NDNR records indicate that in 1962 there were 51 active irrigation wells in a broadly delineated area that encompasses the Mirage Flats District. As of July 2004 there were 217 active irrigation wells in that area (Figure 46). Most of the wells in the Mirage Flats District are located several miles from this river reach. There are 77 irrigation wells within 2 miles of the river throughout this reach. Eighteen of the irrigation wells are on the south side of the river and, of the 59 on the north, 50 are also in the broadly delineated Mirage Flats region included on the map (Figure 47). It is likely that the additional consumptive use of the ground water wells is now greater than the average annual seepage from the surface water irrigation project and is causing the ground water level declines.

The saturated thickness of the principal aquifer in the Mirage Flats area is estimated to be between 200 and 300 feet with higher levels generally being to the south and east. Figure 26 shows direction of ground water flow to be toward the river and indicates ground water from the southern portions of the Mirage Flats project area is reaching the Niobrara River upstream of the confluence of Box Butte Creek. There have been water level declines in wells along the southern portion of the Mirage Flats area near the river, although not as significant as the declines in the northern portion of the Mirage Flats area (Figure 43). Based upon the reach gain estimates it seems likely that despite ground water level declines in part of the project area, ground water continues to provide baseflow to the river in this reach. It is also important to note that this river reach is hydrologically connected to the aquifer in Box Butte County where there are significant ground water level declines. At this time there are insufficient data available to know the exact amount and timing of any baseflow reaching this river reach or how the ground water level declines might be affecting the baseflow. The installation of a stream gage station and monitoring wells along with other studies to gather data would help answer these questions.

### Conclusions

In summary, at the current time this reach of the river has received no calls for administration. There is little historic stream flow data to show trends in stream flow. Ground water contour maps and stream flow observations show that this reach of the Niobrara River gains baseflow. Water well hydrographs and the CSD decline map show significant ground water level declines in aquifers that are hydrologically connected to this river reach. These gains currently appear to be sufficient to satisfy the surface water rights in the reach but there is some anecdotal information that the flows are declining and that administration could be required in the near future. Long term ground water declines associated with ground water pumping in the Mirage

Flats area are affecting the river, but the magnitude and timing of such effects and whether such effects will adversely impact surface water rights in the reach in the near or distant future cannot be determined without further study.

### ***Confluence of Box Butte Creek to the Eastern Boundary of the Natural Resources District***

Downstream of the confluence of Box Butte Creek there are no records of calls for surface water administration and it appears that there is sufficient streamflow to satisfy all downstream rights. This reach would be impacted by any changes in base flow due to development in the Mirage Flats Irrigation District, which could adversely affect the surface water rights immediately downstream.

## ***Box Butte Creek Basin***

### **General Description**

Box Butte Creek is a tributary of the Niobrara River that enters the river below the Mirage Flats Canal headgate and drains approximately 247 square miles. The Creek originates east of Hemingford, flows toward the southeast for about 10 miles, and then turns towards the northeast and Sheridan County. After entering Sheridan County it turns north toward the Niobrara River.

Cady et. al. (1946) noted that in the 1930's in Box Butte County, Box Butte Creek was a perennial stream except near the eastern portion of the county near the Sheridan County line and that in certain moist years even this reach may have been perennial. There are no continuous gaging records for Box Butte Creek. According to numerous observations west of the Sheridan County line, Box Butte Creek is no longer a perennial stream but east of the Sheridan County line the creek still has constant flow. Spot gaging on the creek in 1986 and again in December 2002, a very dry year, found flow near the mouth of the creek with the creek becoming dry about ½ mile further upstream. In 2002 there was also ponded water at a point a number of miles upstream and cattails at points along the stream. For further general information relevant to the Box Butte basin, including information on precipitation, land cover, and aquifers see the Niobrara River Basin section of this report.

### **Surface Water Appropriations/Administration/Characterization of Surface Water Flows**

Six of the seven surface water rights in the Box Butte Creek basin, with priority dates from 1950 to 1989, are on the mainstem; two are storage rights. In a 1979 adjudication of surface water rights, a number of rights in Box Butte basin were cancelled. Nebraska Department of Natural Resources personnel at one time received calls for surface water rights administration along Box Butte Creek but are no longer asked to administer. It is possible that the lack of calls for administration in recent years is due to a recognition on the part of water right holders that no water is available.

## **Hydrogeology**

*(Note: for general geology and hydrology, see the corresponding section on the Niobrara Basin).*

Cady (1946) reported that ground water in the northern third of the Box Butte County drained into the lowlands of the Niobrara, either directly, or through Box Butte Creek. In the western area of the Box Butte Creek basin the Box Butte Unit, a thin very clayey silt layer, acts as a confining layer and causes a perched water table where present (Souders et al, 1980). The Sheep Creek Unit mantles the Box Butte Unit in much of the basin. This unit is not a major aquifer; however, it has been reported that some shallow stock and domestic wells obtain their water supply from this unit where it is saturated due to the perched water table caused by the Box Butte Unit (Souders et al, 1980). It is likely that the perched water table in the Sheep Creek Unit is the source of baseflow for Box Butte Creek in its upper reaches. At the Box Butte – Sheridan County line the Box Butte Unit is at considerable depth, 200+ feet, and overlain by the Runningwater Unit. Additionally, Testhole 7-B-79 from Souders (1981) indicates that the Box Butte Unit is either no longer present or no longer contains as high of a percentage of clay east of the Box Butte – Sheridan County line near Box Butte Creek, meaning it is no longer an effective confining layer.

The Runningwater Unit has a saturated thickness of more than 100 feet where Box Butte Creek crosses the Box Butte – Sheridan County line. The Runningwater, which is composed of sand and gravel stream deposits, is estimated to be able to yield enough water to develop 400 to 800 gpm irrigation wells (Souders et al, 1980). The water table contours indicate Box Butte Creek gains water from this unit from the Box Butte – Sheridan County line to its confluence with the Niobrara River. The Box Butte, Sheep Creek and Runningwater Units are considered to be part of the Ogallala Group, which is what is shown on the geology map (Figure 18).

## **Ground Water Wells/Development**

The surface water basin of Box Butte Creek includes 155 active registered irrigation wells. Figure 32 indicates both the location of irrigation wells in the district and the substantial ground water declines that have occurred in much of the subbasin. These declines are in aquifers that are hydrologically connected to Box Butte Creek.

## **Conclusions**

Stream flow in Box Butte Creek has declined since the 1930's. Wells in the basin are contributing to changes in ground water levels in aquifers that are hydrologically connected to Box Butte Creek. The consumptive use from ground water wells has caused or will cause depletions in Box Butte Creek and has adversely affected surface water rights in the basin.

## ***Snake Creek Basin***

### **General Description**

In the 1930's and 40's Snake Creek was a perennial stream with a small discharge, except during floods, that arose in eastern Sioux County and ran in an easterly direction across the southern

portion of Box Butte County before losing itself in a broad lowland 3 or 4 miles wide near Alliance (Cady, et. al. (1946). In a 1980 report Souders, et. al. (1980) stated that Snake Creek flowed year round from west of the Box Butte County line to east of Kilpatrick Lake and that east of there it was an ephemeral stream. Other information in that report indicates that at that time Snake Creek had areas of shallow water table along its lower reach and that to some degree the lowering of the water table by pumping had salvaged evapotranspiration in some of that area. Today Snake Creek only flows west of Kilpatrick Lake.

The watershed is a part of the Niobrara Basin, although the Creek did not have any surface water connection to the Niobrara River. There are other similar streams in this area including Point of Rocks Creek (a Snake Creek tributary) and nearby Hemingford Creek and Berea Creek, which dead-end into the western portion of the Sandhills. Souders et. al. (1980) identified these three streams as being ephemeral. These creeks flow generally northwest to southeast, ultimately dead-ending on the western portion of the Sandhills. For further information relevant to the Snake Creek Basin and precipitation and land cover in the basin, see the section on the Niobrara River Basin.

### **Surface Water Appropriations/Administration/Characterization of Surface Water Flows**

There are currently five surface water rights associated with the Snake Creek Basin. Two of those are associated with Kilpatrick Reservoir, one with Kilpatrick Canals and two with Snake Creek tributaries. Two rights are for storage, two for irrigation, and one for supplemental irrigation. Priority dates range from 1894 for the Kilpatrick canals and 1911 for Kilpatrick Reservoir to 1970 and 1973 for the water rights on the tributaries.

Administration has not occurred in the Snake Creek Basin since the early 1970s. This may be in part because the three rights on Snake Creek proper are all for Kilpatrick Reservoir and canals and the other two rights have no rights upstream of them. Thus there are no other rights to call on.

There are no gages on Snake Creek. Spot measurements showed flow above Kilpatrick reservoir in 1983, although not in 1986 or 1987. There are also reports of wetlands in the area. Thirty years ago it was not unusual to measure 4 to 6 cfs of inflow to the reservoir compared to current measurements of 1 to two cfs range (Hayden, 2002). At one time the basin also contained Bronco Lake, which has been dry for some time. In 2004 it was reported for the first time that Kilpatrick Reservoir was dry. Snake Creek has ceased to flow below the Kilpatrick Reservoir. For all practical purposes, only above Kilpatrick Reservoir can Snake Creek be called a live stream.

### **Hydrogeology**

Details on the hydrogeology near these creeks can be found in the hydrogeology discussion within the Niobrara River Basin. In short, the Arikaree and Ogallala groups are hydrologically connected to Snake Creek and are capable of producing water for large capacity irrigation wells. The configuration of the water table continues to show ground water flow moving toward the stream as it approaches the area of the stream.

## **Ground Water Wells/Development**

Snake Creek basin currently has 780 active registered irrigation wells. Approximately 767 of these wells are within a five-mile distance of the creek. Figure 5 indicates the location of irrigation wells in the district along with the stream network. Heavy pumping of ground water wells in the area has resulted in ground water levels falling by about 30+ feet in northern portions of the Snake Creek Basin, averaging 1 foot of decline per year since 1960. The edges of the decline area now reach beyond the Snake Creek subbasin and into the Niobrara River Basin as well as out of the UNWNRD and into northern Morrill County in the North Platte Natural Resources District (Figure 32).

## **Conclusions**

Ground water pumping in the basin has contributed to declines in streamflow in Snake Creek to the degree that the only portion of Snake Creek that exists as a live stream is above Kilpatrick Reservoir.

## ***White River Basin and Hat Creek Basin***

### **General Description**

The White River Basin and Hat Creek Basin include 247 square miles in the northern portion of the Upper-Niobrara White NRD. Figure 3 presents land cover for the overall UNWNRD. Precipitation information for Chadron is provided in Figure 2. Annual precipitation at the Chadron station has minimum, maximum, and average annual values of 8.45, 23.16, and 15.92 inches respectively for the period of 1949 to 2003. There have been no significant long-term trends for precipitation in the basin. Information on precipitation and land use in the basin can be found in the discussion on the Niobrara River Basin.

### **Surface Water Appropriations/Administration/Characterization of Surface Water Flows**

The oldest surface water right in the White and Hat basins dates to 1880 and there are a total of 527 surface water irrigation rights in the area. Of those, 296 rights are for the White River Basin, and 231 rights are for the Hat Creek Basin. About 25% of the rights in the basin are storage rights. Many small dams have been built on tributaries for the purpose of watering livestock. Figure 1 provides a map of surface water diversions throughout the UNWNRD. Figure 48 provides cumulative surface water appropriations in the basin, and Figure 49 provides surface water appropriation acres by use. The White River Basin contains 1,620 square miles in Nebraska and the Hat Creek Basin contains 474 square miles.

The basins support one surface water irrigation district and a large number of individual irrigation rights. Whitney Reservoir diverts water from the White River downstream from Crawford and provides water to the Whitney Irrigation District. Surface waters in the study area also support other uses. The upper reaches of the White River, Hat Creek and their tributaries support one of Nebraska's best cold-water fisheries. Crawford's municipal water supply comes

from wells in the White River alluvium. Although they have wells, both Crawford and Chadron also have surface water rights associated with their municipal water systems.

Surface water rights in both the Hat Creek and White River basins are administered in most years. There has been an informal moratorium and new surface water rights have been denied in both basins since 1995 due to insufficient flow.

Sando (1991) estimated and characterized what would have been natural streamflow without irrigation depletions on the White River near the Nebraska state line and found there would have been flow in every month in the 1976 to 1989 time period with average annual flows ranging from 14,654 acre-feet to 69,173 acre-feet (pg. 18). Sando indicated that the White River in Nebraska generally flows year round. However, some locations in some years experience periods of no flow. He also noted that streamflow generally was not sufficient to fully satisfy the net irrigation requirement for all irrigators during the later part of the irrigation season (pg. 11).

The White River does have continuous flow at a gage at Crawford and its gaged annual flows average 14,719 acre-feet and have remained fairly constant through time. There is a gage on the White River at Crawford that shows no significant trend on flows since 1931 (Figure 50). This may be a reflection of the commitment of flows at Crawford to downstream water rights.

While there is no Nebraska gage on Hat Creek, there is a gage on Hat Creek some distance into South Dakota near Edgemont. No significant flow trend is apparent for that gage during the 1951 to 2002 time period.

### **Hydrogeology**

The aquifers in these basins are nearly nonexistent. Geologic cross-sections A-A' and B-B' (Figures 21 & 22) show the Arikaree Group as the primary unit in the western upper reaches (southern area of the basins) of the river basins. This is the same Arikaree Group aquifer that is found in the Niobrara River Basin and whose geologic properties were discussed in the earlier section of this report on the Niobrara River Basin. The Pine Ridge forms the surface water divide between waters that flow to the Niobrara to the south, and the White and Hat Creek basins to the north. While a ground water divide is also found along the Pine Ridge it is important to remember that a ground water divide is not permanent and that the direction of ground water flow can be influenced by stresses to the system.

Looking at the same cross-sections mentioned above, moving north from the Pine Ridge, lower geologic units are found at the surface, the Arikaree is literally cut off in these basins where it has eroded away and relatively impermeable materials are at the surface. The geologic units below the Arikaree and that outcrop progressively to the north are, in order, the Brule, the Chadron, and the Pierre Shale. None of these geologic units are considered major sources of ground water. The Brule is a tight formation composed primarily of silts and clays and has a minimal hydraulic conductivity of less than 25 feet per day (Olsson Associates, 1993). In some areas there may be a significant saturated thickness that contains a great deal of water; however, the hydraulic conductivity of unfractured Brule is very low (Wenzel, et al., 1946).

The Chadron consists mostly of massive silty claystones, light brownish to pink in color. These rocks owe their origin in large part to extensive deposits of volcanic ash, now mostly devitrified into clays. Occasionally discrete beds of volcanic ash can be found in the Chadron. Some channel sandstones may be present. A coarse sandy unit is often found at the base of the Chadron. The Chadron is similar to the Brule, it is tight and has a low hydraulic conductivity except in fractures or in the sand beds which are limited in areal extent. The Chadron rests on the Pierre throughout most of northwestern Nebraska.

The Pierre Shale is predominantly a dark gray or brownish-gray shale, but also contains thin beds of bentonite, zones of calcareous concretions, and some shaly limestones. The Pierre, which crops out over most of the northern part of the Hat and White Basins, is considered impermeable. It is found at the surface in the west and is overlain again by younger, more permeable formations in the far eastern areas of the Hat and White Basins. This unit is very tight and is not considered to hold any extractable ground water except where there are extensive fractures in contact with a source of water such as an alluvial valley.

The principal aquifer, the Arikaree, is recharged by precipitation and inflow from the western edge of the UNWNRD. Streams and tributaries that begin in this relatively permeable material on the Pine Ridge have perennial flow maintained by ground water baseflow in the upper reaches but ground water contribution effectively ceases once the streams flow over other geologic units. Bentall and Hamer (1980) in reference to Hat Creek, the White River, White Clay Creek, and their tributaries indicated that it was unknown whether any of these streams in their natural state flowed continuously as far as the South Dakota state line. They noted that they now become dry before they reach the state line because many impoundments reduce inflow from tributaries and diversions for irrigation consume all the remaining flow.

Fractures in the otherwise relatively impermeable Brule formation supply water for some stock and domestic wells as do the Chadron sands. At a few specific sites, where fracture systems intersect faults, this formation contributes up to 600 gallons per minute from springs (Jacobson-Helgoth Consultants, 1994). There are also some river deposited sediments along the major drainages. In their lower reaches the streams may be in hydrologic connection with small amounts of alluvial material, Chadron sands or fractures in the Pierre Shale or Brule Formation, but overall there is little ground water available for high capacity uses outside the upper reaches of the basin.

Based upon geologic cross-sections A-A' and B-B' (Figures 21 & 22), water table contour maps and other evidence, Hat Creek, White River and some of their tributaries are hydrologically connected to ground water in their upper reaches. The ground water source is the same Arikaree Group aquifer that is hydrologically connected to the Niobrara River; therefore, changes in stressors in either river basin could affect the baseflow to streams in the other basins. Outside the extent of the Arikaree, there is an absence of aquifers. However, where the other geologic formations provide water to small capacity wells, it is likely the formation through fractures is in hydrologic connection with a stream and/or alluvial aquifer.

## **Ground Water Wells/Development**

There are only 24 registered irrigation wells in the White River and Hat Creek basins and 14 of these were in place prior to 1970. Only three new registered irrigation wells have been completed since 1980. Over 720 other types of depletive wells have been installed in the basin since 1989, but generally the amounts of depletion per well are low in comparison to irrigation wells. There are only 3 large capacity wells pumping more than 500 gallons per minute that are not irrigation wells. Figure 5 provides a map of irrigation wells throughout the district along with the stream network.

There are very few large capacity wells in these basins. This is mainly due to the topography and hydrogeology in the area. The alluvial areas are very small and lie on Pierre Shale and the Brule Formation, both of which are very tight and do not yield water to wells unless a fracture system is tapped.

## **Conclusions**

Due to the nature of the geologic formations in the area the ground water supply in the White and Hat basins is limited. It seems likely that most wells have a hydrologic connection to surface water and would affect surface water appropriations; however, some may be in fractures that have little or no known connection to surface water. Given that the study area has insufficient surface water to grant new appropriations, some monitoring of ground water development trends will be needed to be certain that increased well development does not further deplete already insufficient streamflows.

Because the baseflow for streams in this area originates in the southern margins of the basin along the Pine Ridge, it is possible that ground water development just outside the physical surface water basin could affect baseflow in the headwaters of some streams such as Larabee Creek and possibly Beaver Creek and White Clay Creek, all of which have active surface water rights. The impact of well development outside the surface watershed boundary on the flow of these creeks should be monitored.

## ***Potential Out of Basin Effects of Water Use In the UNWNRD***

To what extent could the ground water declines in Box Butte County affect the North Platte River or its tributaries? A very small portion of the North Platte Basin surface water drainage reaches into the UNWNRD in the southern margins of Box Butte, Sioux, and Sheridan counties. Ground water subflow for a very small portion of Southern Sheridan County is hydrologically connected to the North Platte Basin. Ground water table contours indicate that this area provides baseflow to Blue Creek. However, this is an area where there is not a high gradient and there are many lakes and wetlands that influence ground water flow via evapotranspiration. With these localized complications, the direction of subflow can be difficult to determine.

Based on water table contour maps, the far southwest corner of the UNWNRD also appears to have ground water subflow towards the North Platte Basin, but there is only one irrigation well in that area. Between this area and the North Platte River lies the Brule Formation, an area of

low transmissivity and hydraulic conductivity. The magnitude and timing of any declines originating from development in this area would be long term.

An additional potential impact that could occur due to ground water pumping in the Niobrara Basin/Sandhills area might involve the alkali lakes in the southeast portion of the UNWNRD. Should water table declines in eastern Box Butte County become marked enough, they might influence water table levels further east in the area of the Sandhills lakes.

Water table contours indicate the direction of subflow for ground water in a portion of southeast Sheridan County is towards the Loup River Basin. This area is very far from any stream headwaters and the Loup surface water drainage basin within the UNWNRD contains only five irrigation wells. While there is a hydrologic connection, impacts to surface water appropriators, if any, would be very small, and would likely not be felt for many years.

## **Parameters Considered in Delineating the Areas Where Ground Water is Considered to be Hydrologically Connected to the Surface Water Reaches**

Drawing lines delineating the area of ground water hydrologically connected to a specific reach of a river is a technically complex task. Aquifer boundaries are relatively easy to define where impermeable geological formations outcrop near the surface or a stream that penetrates the full thickness of the aquifer. In absence of such boundaries, ground water table divides or ground water flow lines from the endpoint of the fully appropriated river reach could also be used. However, a ground water well on one side of a ground water table divide can still impact a stream on the other side of the divide and if the ground water table declines significantly, the location of the ground water table divide itself will change. Surface water boundaries generally are not useful for determining ground water flow, but in some instances the surface water divide does provide a major influence on ground water flows and mimics the location of the ground water divide.

As defined in this report the river reaches that are recommended to be designated as fully appropriated are the full reaches of the White River and Hat Creek, the Niobrara above the Mirage Flats diversion, Box Butte Creek and Snake Creek.

In the White River and Hat Creek, the live sections of the streams are in the headwaters and are in hydrologic connection with the Arikaree aquifer, which continues into the Niobrara River Surface Water Basin. Possible boundaries in this area include the ground water and surface water divides. However, the situation exists where ground water well development outside of these boundaries could affect baseflow in the stream reaches of concern. Hydrologically speaking, there is a continuous aquifer from the Niobrara River to the headwaters of the White River and Hat Creek. However, as distance increases away from the headwaters the degree of connection decreases.

One way to measure the degree of connection is to use a stream depletion calculation (Jenkins, 1977). Based upon existing data concerning transmissivity and specific yield the following

stream depletion lines were calculated: 28% over 40 years - 2.5 to 5 miles from the upper reaches of the streams, over 80 years the range is 3 to 7 miles and over 120 years the range is 4 to 8 miles. Some value of stream depletion could be chosen as the boundary for the area in which ground water is hydrologically connected to the stream reach.

In the Niobrara River basin near the Mirage Flats diversion point there is a stream (Cottonwood/Pebble Creek) located on the north side of the River; however, there is no reason to believe that this stream fully penetrates the aquifer. Another option is this area would be to follow a ground water flow line north from the diversion point to where it intersects the boundary with the White River. The ground water flow line would be even less of a hydrologic boundary than the stream.

To the south of the Niobrara River the situation is more complex. The question raised above, of the effects of ground water declines across a ground water divide is applicable. According to the ground water level decline maps developed by the CSD in Box Butte County, a 20' to 30' decline has occurred at the ground water divide between the Niobrara Basin and the Snake and Box Butte Creek basins. Moving from the ground water divide north toward the Niobrara River the 5' to 10' decline zone reaches to within a mile of the Niobrara River. There is question as to the degree of hydrologic connection between the decline area and the Niobrara River due to the presence of low permeability geologic materials. However, as was mentioned previously, Souders et al (1980) stated that this material does contain enough water to produce wells of 600+ gallons per minute and that a possible 1,500 acre feet per year of ground water flow reaches the river above Box Butte Reservoir. Given the evidence and the severity of the ground water level declines any possible effect on the fully appropriated river reach must be considered.

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